

Strengthening Literacy and Father-Child Relationships through Reading

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Reading is a fundamental skill. A child's ability to read proficiently by third grade is the most significant predictor of his or her school success, high school completion, and future economic stability. However, approximately 80 percent of low-income children will not achieve this crucial milestone in 2013. Conversely, we know that when parents—particularly fathers—are engaged in their children's education and experiential learning, those children are more likely to be reading proficiently by third grade and experience overall greater academic success. This practice brief examines the challenges many low-income fathers face in being “reading role models” for their children and suggestions for father-focused literacy programs and interventions that support fathers as one of the first and most crucial teachers for their children.

Background

Children become successful readers when their parents are involved and engaged in their learning. Fathers, however, are often an overlooked resource when it comes to their children's education. This is particularly evident among children of color and children from low-income families, who are less likely to read as well as their white, higher income peers.¹ This gap is evident by the beginning of fourth grade and continues through high school graduation, and beyond. Currently, researchers are especially concerned about “grade level reading” – that is, whether children are reading at a skill level appropriate for their current grade. Children who are below grade level reading at one age are unlikely to catch up to their peers without intense, expensive interventions. As such, efforts to reduce reading gaps should be aimed primarily at younger children. Specifically, research suggests that children need to be at grade level reading skills by third grade. Third grade is when the focus shifts from learning to read, to reading to learn.²



Given the importance of helping children develop reading skills early, parents have been frequent targets of reading interventions. While most programs have been gender neutral or mother-focused, WIFI recommends that more programs be developed and implemented with a specific father focus. We offer several reasons for father-child reading programs:

1. Low-income fathers are less likely to read to their children than mothers.³ This relationship stands even for residential parents. As fathers continue to become more involved in their children's daily lives and care, reading to children is a clear and beneficial way for fathers to spend quality time with their children.
2. Reading programs help parents learn to read better as well. Low income men and men of color face many barriers securing living-wage employment. Any program that can improve their reading skills is likely to translate into better potential employment opportunities.

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3. Reading time, especially bedtime reading routines, provides important bonding opportunities for fathers and children. Children have a chance to reflect on their day and share stories and ideas with their fathers.
4. Fathers can read with their children even if they do not share a residence with them. Men can read to their child over the phone, or read along with their child if they have copies of the books. This increases the opportunity for positive father involvement for nonresidential fathers. Some programs encourage incarcerated fathers to audio or videotape themselves reading picture books so their children can play the recordings at bedtime while "reading" the book.

At Women In Fatherhood, we believe it is especially important to support fathers in reading with their children. Mothers often spend more time caring domestically for children than fathers, so father-child reading time would be a way for fathers to spend more time with their children that benefits all family members.

Additionally, men may stimulate children's cognitive development differently than women through use of different language, conversation styles, or types of books read.⁴

Fathers specifically, and parents generally, may face numerous barriers to increasing reading time with their children. Sometimes parents aren't confident in their reading skills and may be particularly daunted by having to read out loud to their children. As such, parents with low literacy and/or language acquisition skills may avoid or find reading unpleasant.⁵



WIFI believes all children should develop the early reading skills needed to succeed in school and adulthood. Because parents are children’s first and most important teachers, we further argue that fathers should be given the tools and encouragement needed to focus on developing their children’s reading skills.

This brief describes several program evaluations that demonstrate 1) parents can be taught how to effectively read with their children, and 2) children benefit academically from reading with their parents.

Other parents are simply unaware of the numerous benefits of reading to their children, or feel that their children do not want to be read to. Some parents think reading is only important once children are close to being able to read on their own, and skip reading to infants and toddlers. Many parents are tired at the end of the day, and may not have the energy to engage in an “elective” activity such as reading. Finally, low-income families may not be able to afford reading materials.

Effective Family Literacy Programs

Numerous programs are designed to increase parent-child reading and/or improve child-reading skills through parental education. A handful of those programs have been rigorously evaluated and shown to be effective in addressing reading activities or child outcomes. We review those programs below. Note that most of these programs served low-income families, but almost all of the participating parents were mothers. There is no reason to believe these programs could not be equally effective with fathers, especially if programs adapt recruitment and services to address the specific needs and concerns of fathers.

Additionally, the five programs below have strong positive evaluation findings, but are only a subset of all family literacy programs. Some of those other programs may also have strong evaluation findings. This list is not an exhaustive review of the evidence regarding the efficacy of parent-child reading interventions, but should be viewed as illustrative of the various kinds of effective efforts available.

Examples of Effective Family Literacy Programs

1. Reach Out and Read (ROR)

ROR works through pediatrician offices to educate parents on the importance of reading and distributes free children books. At well-check visits for children aged 6 months to 5 years, pediatricians spend time talking about reading to the child; child and parent(s) receive a new book to keep; and volunteers model reading to children in the waiting room.⁶ A random assignment evaluation documented the effects of ROR on low-income families with children aged 5 to 11 months. After an average of 3 well-child visits, treatment families had a 40% increase in literacy orientation compared to a 16% increase in control families. Additionally, treatment families read to children on average 4.3 days a week, compared to average 2.8 days a week in control families. Finally, older toddlers in the treatment group had higher vocabulary scores than their control group counterparts (there was no significant change for younger children).⁷

2. Hear and Say Reading with Toddlers

Hear and Say Reading with Toddlers is a video-based parent instruction program. The 17-minute video explains dialogic reading – a reading technique that encourages child participation in the story through open ended questions and plot prediction. For example, a parent may ask, “What do you think happens next?” The program is designed for parents of children aged 2 to 3 years old.⁸ This program’s evaluation involved 112 families, most of whom were white and with post high school education. The families were assigned to one of three treatment groups: video alone; video with a follow-up phone call with a reading professional; or video with in-person, small group instruction with a professional. All three groups showed a four-fold increase in dialogic reading behaviors and children had increased language use during reading. Parents with only a high school education showed larger gains with the in-person instruction model compared to the video-only version.⁹

3. Untitled Experimental Program for Mothers of Disadvantaged Preschool Children

This program was designed specifically for evaluation studies and does not appear to be available for general implementation. Regardless, we include it in this review as further evidence of the effectiveness of literacy-focused parent education. The program targeted African-American mothers of children aged 3 to 4 years old who resided in low-income neighborhoods. The treatment group received 22 hours of training led by preschool teachers about ways to support their children’s learning and development. Treatment children showed significantly higher improvements in linguistic functioning than control group children.¹⁰

4. Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)

HIPPY is a home visitation program for parents of 4 and 5 year old children. Paraprofessionals teach parents how to prepare their children for school through activity packs and the provision of books. Parents also attend group sessions.¹¹ HIPPY’s positive program evaluation followed families of four-year-old children for one year. At follow-up, treatment children had higher standardized reading scores than control group children.¹²

5. Early Head Start

Early Head Start is a federally-funded program for expectant parents or parents of children aged 0 to 3 years old. The various community-based programs can serve families through home visits, center-based services or a combination of the two. This program, unlike the above programs, includes direct child intervention such as childcare, as well as parent education focused on improving child development.¹³ Early Head Start’s program evaluation followed parents who were expecting a child or had a child less than 12 months of age until the child was age 3. Treatment parents read more frequently to their children than control parents. Additionally, treatment children had slightly higher vocabulary scores than their control counterparts. These results were stronger for African Americans, Hispanics and adolescent parents.¹⁴

Examples of Father-focused Reading Interventions

We were unable to find any rigorously evaluated family literacy programs that specifically targeted fathers. While we are unaware of programs with demonstrable effects, there are several father-focused reading programs being implemented throughout the United States. We describe several below that appear to be unique or promising.

1. Words Travel Family Connections

Words Travel Family Connections (WTFC) is a program implemented by Volunteers of America, based on a service model developed by Scholastic Inc.¹⁵ WTFC is an 8 week program that works with incarcerated parents (both mothers and fathers, but men outnumber women in prison). Parents learn about children's books and different ways to read out loud. They are then recorded reading books, and the books are sent or given to the children along with recordings in their own backpack.



2. Hope House Father to Child Reading Program

Like WTFC, the Father to Child Reading Program provides children's books for inmates to read into an audio or video recorder, and the book and the taped story are mailed home to the inmate's child. Over a 10-year period, Hope House has sent approximately 10,000 books to children with fathers in prison. For many fathers it is the first story they have ever

read to their child. In Hope House's periodic surveysⁱ of caregivers of children who receive these books, 86% report that their children read more as a result of getting books from their fathers.

Note: Family literacy programs for incarcerated parents and their children can support the literacy and academic success of the child and parent, help build and maintain close ties between the parent and child, and support reentry success for the parent. Unfortunately, in much of the research on prison-based family literacy, fathers were not studied—incarcerated mothers were used to examine the effects of such programs on child well-being; even though, most parents in prison are fathers (744,200 fathers compared to 65,600 mothers). The number of fathers in prison increased 76% (and the number of mothers in prison increased 122%) between 1991 and 2007. Family literacy programs for incarcerated parents and their children are cost-effective “win-win” programs that deserve further attention from evaluators, practitioners, and funders.

3. Read to Me Daddy

Similarly, the Read to Me Daddy/Mommy, video records incarcerated parents reading a book to their child and provides the child with the book and the DVD recording.¹⁶ The program was developed by Reentry Benefiting Families, an Initiative of Refined by Fire Ministries, Inc. The program was piloted in Louisiana.

4. Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED)

FRED was developed by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service (part of Texas A&M) to support fathers and father figures in daily reading to children.¹⁷ The program provides fathers with packets describing the program, tips for reading to children, a reading log, and recommended reading lists. The packets are available in English and Spanish. Over the four weeks of the program, fathers are expected to read to their children daily and document their efforts in the reading log. The intervention culminates in a celebratory party for the fathers and children. The program has served over 6,000 children and their fathers over the past decade in Texas, and is also being implemented outside of the extension in other states. Follow-up surveysⁱ suggest that fathers believe program participation improved the quality and quantity of time spent with their children.¹⁸

ⁱ These were surveys done without a comparison/control group and do not constitute a formal outcome evaluation.

What We Know about Fathers and Reading: Important Adaptations for Reading Programs

We are aware of several programs with demonstrated effects on parental reading behaviors and/or child literacy outcomes, but these programs work primarily with mothers. We have found several father-focused literacy programs being implemented throughout the country; however, none of these have been subject to rigorous program evaluations. It will be important for mother-focused programs to expand recruitment and service efforts to include fathers, while concurrently conducting rigorous evaluations on father-focused programs to determine their effectiveness and if neutral—or mother-focused programs should be adapted for fathers and how.

With this knowledge and service gap in mind, we conclude this brief with tips for organizations looking to adapt promising or proven literacy programs with fathers. These tips include ways to identify fathers at higher risk of not reading to their children, and concerns that fathers may have about participating in a literacy intervention.

- Dads are more likely to read to girls. Fathers report reading and engaging in literacy activities more frequently with their daughters than their sons.¹⁹
- Married fathers are more likely to read to their children than unmarried dads.²⁰
- Dads with high school diplomas report reading with their children more frequently than fathers who dropped out of high school.²¹
- Fathers who prefer to speak English are more likely to engage in reading with their children than fathers who prefer to speak Spanish.²²
- White fathers report reading to their children more frequently than African-American or Latino fathers.²³
- More than just reading influences child literacy skills. Fathers uncomfortable with reading aloud can also support early literacy by singing children songs and jingles, reciting nursery rhymes, and talking in rhymes or alliteration (e.g., My baby boy wears blue boots).²⁴
- Additionally, dads should be encouraged to capitalize on “incidental pre-literacy experiences.” For example, fathers can point out the letters on major street or store signs, restaurant menus, magazines and the internet.²⁵
- Fathers should also be encouraged to just talk to and with their children. Children develop their vocabularies, in part, by having routine conversations with their caregivers (e.g., “Where’s your shoe? Let’s go find your shoe! Here it is; it was in the closet. Let’s put the shoes on your feet.”).²⁶
- Dads should be encouraged to start reading with their children from an early age. Although some parents may think that babies are too young to understand, or sit through, reading a book, a recent meta-analysis (compilation of numerous studies) showed that reading was more effective when parents started that routine when children were 7 to 12 months old, compared to children aged 1 or 2 years.²⁷
- Recognize the hesitation fathers may feel about participating in a literacy intervention. Most illiterate or less literate people invest significant energy in hiding their difficulties with reading. Explicit participation in a reading intervention would highlight their literacy challenges.²⁸
- Non-residential fathers will face different program participation challenges than residential fathers. They may not be able to gain access to their children on a regular basis, even by phone. Programs should consider connecting with mothers to describe the program, and the benefits participation will have for children and parents, and ask mothers to encourage father participation. Programs can develop a pamphlet or talking points for mothers to use when describing the program to their children’s fathers.

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Conclusion

Father-focused family literacy programs have the potential to benefit all family members. The programs benefit fathers through improving their own reading skills. They improve father-child relationships through increased quality time together. They improve child literacy skills and may be effective at reducing the achievement gap. Finally, these programs may reduce some of the childcare load mothers carry by increasing father-child time.

WIFI believes that father-child reading programs are important services that should be implemented, evaluated, and if necessary, adapted to support men, fathers and their families.

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About Women In Fatherhood, Inc. (WIFI):

Women In Fatherhood, Inc. was founded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is the only national nonprofit organization that advocates for responsible fatherhood from the perspective of women. WIFI seeks to remove the structural and relational barriers men and fathers face to contributing positively to children, families, and communities.

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Notes

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